

Slight increase in racial minorities perceiving workplace discrimination: IPS-OnePeople.sg survey

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SINGAPORE - While a study of racial and religious harmony in Singapore showed improvements in relations between the different groups, researchers found an area of concern - almost 60 per cent of Malays and 56 per cent of Indians perceived discriminatory treatment at work.

This was a slight increase from the 58.7 per cent of Malays and 52.6 per cent of Indians five years ago, according to the latest Institute of Policy Studies-OnePeople.sg survey on racial and religious harmony released on Tuesday (July 30).

Minority groups indicated in the study that they felt discriminated against when applying for jobs or seeking a promotion.

For example, 51.6 per cent of Malays last year said that they "sometimes" or "often/very often or always" felt discriminated against when applying for a job, an increase from 47.2 per cent in 2013.

The 2018 study showed that 47 per cent of Indians felt the same way, as did about 12 per cent of Chinese respondents.

Separately, the study found that to Chinese respondents, a job applicant's race was sometimes important when hiring someone to work for them.

Just over 34 per cent of Chinese Singaporeans felt that way, compared with about 21 per cent of Malays and 16 per cent of Indians.

When it came to job promotions, almost 14 per cent of Chinese "sometimes" or "often/very often or always" perceived discrimination, but the figure was higher for Malays and Indians, around 51 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.

The survey showed that minorities were perceived to be disadvantaged at work, with almost 32 per cent of all respondents saying Malays had to work harder or much harder than someone of another race to reach the top spot in their company.

For Indians, the figure was about 27 per cent, compared with about 14 per cent of Chinese.

But actual discrimination can be hard to prove.

Workplace racial discrimination complaints accounted for 5 per cent of all complaints received by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (Tafep) and the Ministry of Manpower from 2014 to 2018.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said this perception of discrimination is especially so if hiring and promotion processes are not objective and transparent.

"There is room for people to attribute their failure to get a job or promotion to race," he said.

"In a situation where jobs are hard to come by, for instance, in a recession, there could be a higher probability of job seekers blaming their failure to get a job on non-meritocratic reasons."

Noting that perception rather than actual experience can be shaped by one's close circle of relatives and friends, he said that it is important to build trust across ethnic groups.

"Employers should endeavour to be as transparent and objective as possible in their hiring and promotion decisions, such as using measurable criteria and racially diverse interview panels," said Dr Tan

Tafep said that the cases of discrimination it has seen include employers citing race as a requirement in job advertisements, or making inappropriate remarks during interviews.

"In most cases, the employers were not aware their actions could offend others," it said.

"Therefore, it is crucial that employers abide by the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices, and treat all employees fairly and with respect. Employers can contact Tafep for advice and assistance to put in place such practices."

Nanyang Technological University Associate Provost and sociologist Kwok Kian Woon noted that the results echoed the inaugural survey in 2013.

"The relative scores for the three races point to what may be called 'the majority effect'. Members of the Chinese majority tend to have fewer chances of experiencing discrimination... Chinese Singaporeans should not take for granted their majority status, and should consciously and constantly make an effort to reach out to fellow citizens."